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ABSTRACT

Academic computing directors must focus on what actions and policies make a well-coordinated academic computing help desk function effectively. Keeping in mind the needs of both the client and the support team, the key components of a well-managed help desk include: accessing help easily; sorting support team jobs effectively; distributing support team jobs effectively; performing jobs efficiently; training the support team; training faculty, staff, and students; making it easier for the support team to respond to clients; and making it easier for clients to receive support. Sample screens of a form used to submit job requests via the World Wide Web and of a job requests database are included. (AEF)

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Issues in the Creation and Coordination of an Academic Computing Help Desk

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An academic computing help desk is probably one of the busiest places on campus these days as more people use computers the number and the variety of questions dealing with research and computer operation grow. Never the less, I like to imagine a day when everything works, and no one has questions: picture the Maytag® repairman sitting comfortably at the academic computing help desk, snoozing away the afternoon. Unfortunately, reality reminds us constantly that the need for computer assistance on college campuses keeps increasing. In the October 1997 issue of EDUTECH Report, an article titled "Troubled Times for Many IT Departments" describes a widely perceived support staff crisis. Faculty and staff comments about computer assistance on campuses in the EDUTECH article included: "They come in when I'm not here and change things on my machine without telling me why," "They need some bedside manners - they treat us like we're stupid," and "They are very arrogant and independent; they often don't return my phone calls." Having been on both sides of the help desk, I can understand the client's dissatisfaction, but primarily I worry about the demands being placed on the academic computing support team.

Given this seemingly chaotic scenario, academic computing directors must focus on what actions and policies make a well -coordinated academic computing help desk function effectively. Keeping in mind the needs of both the client and the support team, the key components of a well-managed help desk include:

- Accessing help easily
- Sorting support team jobs effectively
- Distributing support team jobs effectively
- Performing jobs efficiently
- Training the support team
- Training faculty, staff and students
- Making it easier for the support team to respond to clients
- Making it easier for clients to receive support

Accessing help easily

The initial contact with the help desk is one of the most important stages in resolving client problems. Methods for contacting the help desk should include walk-up, phone, e-mail, and WWW. During this initial stage the client must have easy access to help and a straight-forward method for submitting a job request. The support person running the help desk needs to be courteous and attentive. In fact, at this point in resolving client problems courtesy is actually more important than subject expertise. The person managing the desk needs to quickly respond to the person either by resolving the problem or by submitting the request to the appropriate support person in a friendly professional manner.

Sorting support team jobs effectively

After the client has contacted the help desk either the client or help desk personnel should enter the job request. The job request information needed is the name of the client, nature of the problem, and the necessary date for completion of the project. The request can easily be entered into a standard form (see figure 1) on the campus web site.

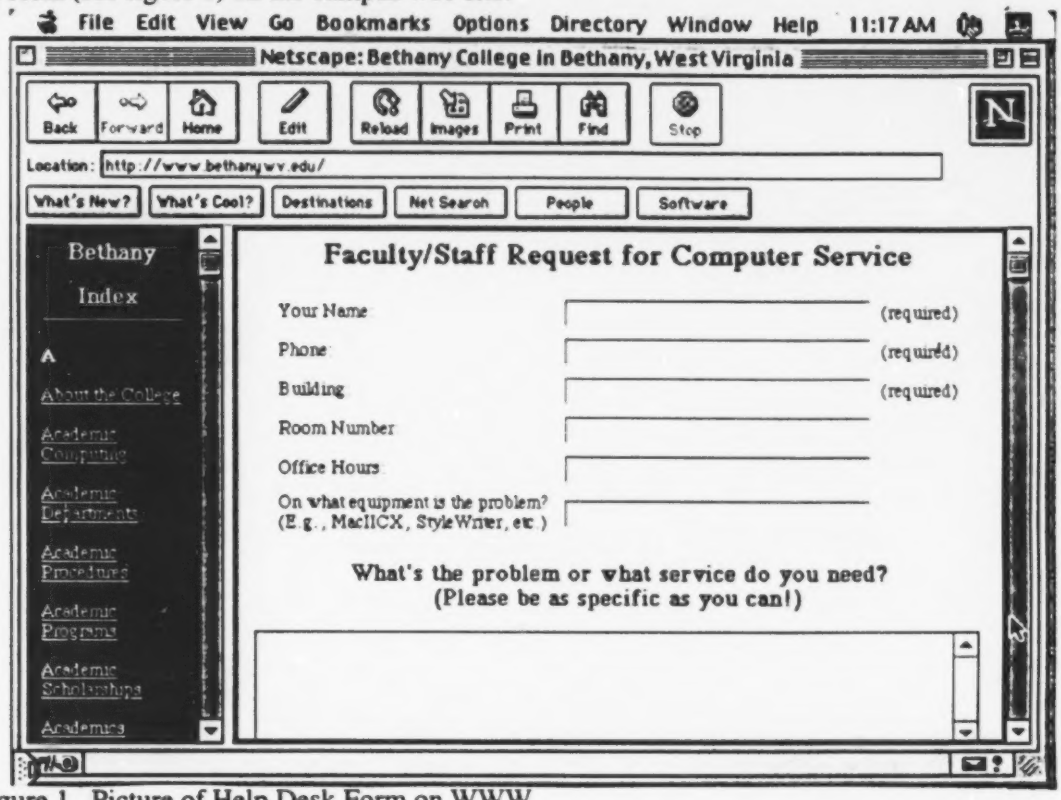
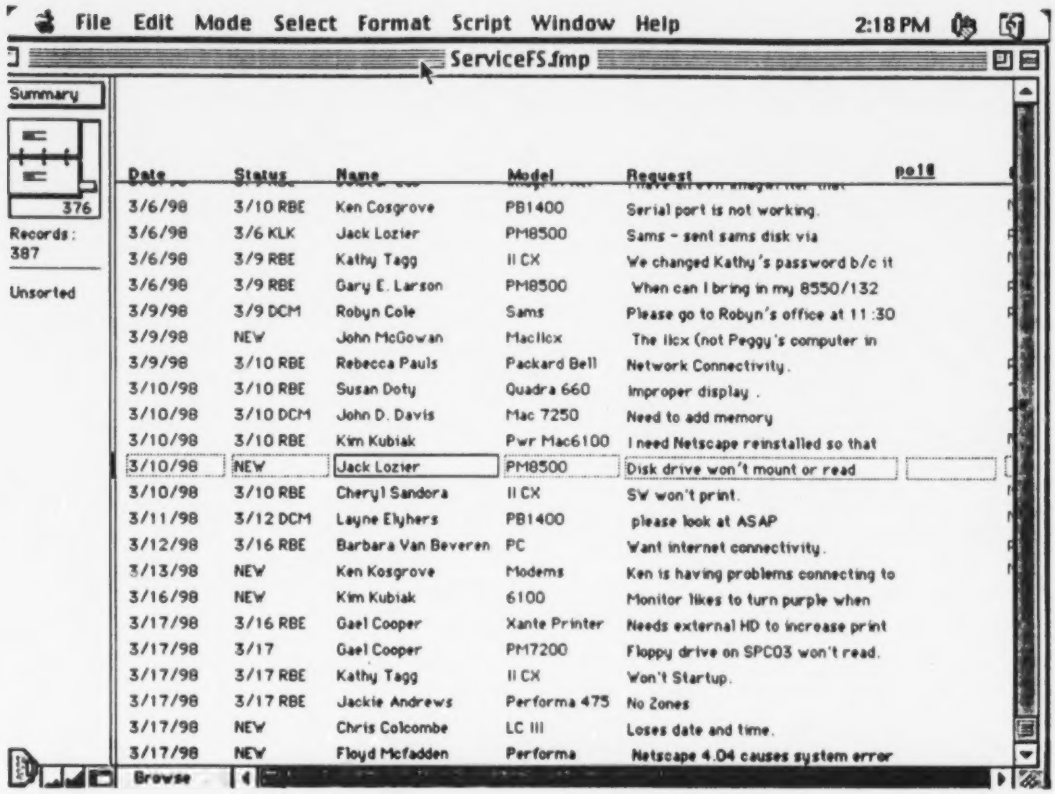


Figure 1. Picture of Help Desk Form on WWW.

Distributing support team jobs effectively

After information regarding the request has been entered into the database via the WWW, the support staff can prioritize and then distribute the jobs (see figure 2). The priority level should be based on guidelines determined by a computing advisory committee. For example, at Bethany most classroom technical problems take priority over all requests if the classroom problem inhibits learning, and most faculty academic computing requests take priority over staff requests.



Date	Status	Name	Model	Request
3/6/98	3/10 RBE	Ken Cosgrove	PB1400	Serial port is not working.
3/6/98	3/6 KLK	Jack Lozier	PM8500	Sams - sent sams disk via
3/6/98	3/9 RBE	Kathy Tagg	II CX	We changed Kathy's password b/c it
3/6/98	3/9 RBE	Gary E. Larson	PM8500	When can I bring in my 8550/132
3/9/98	3/9 DCM	Robyn Cole	Sams	Please go to Robyn's office at 11:30
3/9/98	NEW	John McGowan	MacIIcx	The IIcx (not Peggy's computer in
3/9/98	3/10 RBE	Rebecca Pauls	Packard Bell	Network Connectivity.
3/10/98	3/10 RBE	Susan Doty	Quadra 660	Improper display .
3/10/98	3/10 DCM	John D. Davis	Mac 7250	Need to add memory
3/10/98	3/10 RBE	Kim Kubiak	Pwr Mac6100	I need Netscape reinstalled so that
3/10/98	NEW	Jack Lozier	PM8500	Disk drive won't mount or read
3/10/98	3/10 RBE	Cheryl Sandora	II CX	SW won't print.
3/11/98	3/12 DCM	Layne Elyhers	PB1400	please look at ASAP
3/12/98	3/16 RBE	Barbara Van Beveren	PC	Want internet connectivity.
3/13/98	NEW	Ken Kosgrove	Modems	Ken is having problems connecting to
3/16/98	NEW	Kim Kubiak	6100	Monitor likes to turn purple when
3/17/98	3/16 RBE	Gael Cooper	Xante Printer	Needs external HD to increase print
3/17/98	3/17	Gael Cooper	PM7200	Floppy drive on SPC03 won't read.
3/17/98	3/17 RBE	Kathy Tagg	II CX	Won't Startup.
3/17/98	3/17 RBE	Jackie Andrews	Performa 475	No Zones
3/17/98	NEW	Chris Colcombe	LC III	Loses date and time.
3/17/98	NEW	Floyd Mcfadden	Performa	Netscape 4.04 causes system error

Figure 2. Job requests appear in the database when WWW request forms are submitted.

Performing jobs efficiently

Once the support staff prioritizes the jobs and sorts them, then they perform the jobs. The support staff contacts the client and arranges a meeting. The support team encourages the client to bring the hardware to the repair center. At this point the support staff can post information about the job to the WWW so that the client can find out the status of the request without having to contact the help desk (See figure 3). Such information includes: estimated time for job completion, start date, description of the work to be performed, and the type and status of parts ordered if it is a repair. The capabilities of the database should include easy access, password protection, and search functions.

Figure 3. View of job request submitted via WWW form.

Training the support team

The support team that manages the desk needs to be well trained on both basic long term and short term computing problems. Help desk staff must be trained appropriately on how to answer phones, to talk a person through a technical problem, to solve typical problems, to find answers to information requests, and to distribute job requests to the professional support staff. Information on frequently asked questions should be provided via the WWW, so that the help desk staff and clients have quick answers to problems. Documentation about hardware and software on campus should be available at the help desk, as should diagrams of classroom configurations, along with a troubleshoot list of questions to ask the client. For example, a client might call and say that e-mail is not working. The support staff at Bethany College would ask, "Can you open the e-mail software?", "What message is returned when you retrieve your mail?", and "Can you see the network?" This initial information will help the staff identify and classify the type of problem the client is having.

Training faculty, staff and students

In addition to training the support staff, the academic computing staff needs to train the client base so that the level of sophistication of the questions increases and, possibly, the number of questions decreases. This training can take the form of "help-yourself" documentation and

workshops. The "help-yourself" documentation should include easily accessible on-line manuals, brochures, videos, training materials available on the WWW, newsletters, an F.A.Q. bulletin, and information on standard hardware and software supported by the college.

In addition to "help-yourself" documentation, the academic computing staff should make workshops available for the clients. For instance, departmental workshops can be designed to meet each department's specific needs. This type of workshop succeeds best when the head of the department is involved because faculty tend to participate more when the head of the department shows an interest. The staff can also offer on-demand training when situations arise that call for immediate training. A third type of workshop, project-based group instruction, works especially well when a computer instructor wants to extend a task to different levels of skill. The group attends a series of workshops with the amount of necessary participation dependent upon the skill level with the common goal of completing a project at the end. Fourth, general workshops teach basic computer skills, such as word-processing. Of course, most clients prefer one-on-one training in which the support personnel helps clients with their personal computer. Although time-consuming, this is usually the most successful training method. With such a broad range of training responsibilities, the academic computing staff may need to request computer interest groups on campus to help take some of the pressure off the academic computer support staff. Likewise, more experienced clients can help less experienced clients at workshops and meetings.

Finding a time when most of the clients can attend workshops free of conflict is fairly difficult on a college campus. Invariably, several clients interested in attending workshops are unable to because of scheduling difficulties. Some colleges schedule open periods during the week to accommodate meetings. Consulting the Registrar for periods of lightest scheduling is useful. Scheduling training sessions during the lunch hour generally alleviates time conflicts. Varying the times of the training sessions if possible is a good idea, as is making certain they take up only one-hour time slots.

Making it easier for the support team to respond to clients

Organizing a help desk as outlined, the support team should find they can manage requests faster and more effectively. A well-managed help desk eliminates direct calls to the support staff, allows staff to stay on task, eliminates nuisance calls to technical staff, reduces the number of questions regarding non-standard equipment and, overtime, increases the sophistication of clients' requests. In addition, a well-managed help desk database can help staff identify the "caller of the week, " that is, the individual most obviously needing training. Similarly, the database can also identify the "problem of the week," thereby enabling the academic computing staff to address problems that might effect the entire campus community.

Making it easier for the clients to receive support

A well-managed help desk should also make it easier for clients to receive help. The help desk should provide "small town," personalized service like that offered in a friendly diner. Clients should feel that their request is important and will be successfully resolved within a reasonable time frame.

Making it work

When an institution plans to introduce a help desk the academic computing director and staff need to lay the groundwork adequately in order to ensure that the help desk gets off to a good start. Using the most common avenues of campus communication such as student newspapers, faculty and student electronic bulletin boards, the support staff must publicize where the help desk will be located, when it will commence service, and what its hours will be; the short and long term benefits of a help desk; and how to use the service. Ideally, the college should standardize hardware and software so that the support staff is not required to respond to questions that vary from "how to chat via the WWW" to "how to use the projector in the classroom." Help desk staff must remember, especially at the beginning, the client familiarity and knowledge may vary enormously, so shifting from simple to complex questions will probably be the norm until the college community's level of sophistication has been raised. Staff must remain courteous and never condescend; often excusing their own ignorance is very difficult for clients, especially to their peers. It is also essential that the help desk support staff understands the importance of timely response for job requests.

Regardless of how smoothly a system may run, technical crisis do occur and staff must plan for such contingencies. A help desk is not running well if staff do not respond quickly to a technical crisis. Giving pagers to key technical personnel can help ensure rapid response. Likewise, simply because a system seems to be running well is not a reason to ignore it. Periodically the staff should check how things are running. Providing surveys, such as a "Help Desk Quality Assurance Survey," will help the support staff understand how service is operating from the clients' perspective.

Conclusion

An academic computing help desk is one of the most important services provided to a college community. The clients must receive the best service possible so that their academic computing experiences are great and their experiences do not hinder them from exploring new areas in computing. In addition, the support staff must be well supported so that they can provide good support. Managing a help desk in the manner outlined should help to maintain a happy campus computing environment in which the needs of client and support staff are met.

References

"Troubled Times for Many IT Departments." *The Edutech Report*, October 1997, Vol. 13, Number 7, pg. 1, 3, 6 & 7.